Art and landscape history: British artists in nineteenth-century Val d'Aosta (NW Italy)

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Abstract

This paper explores the value of landscape and topographical art for understanding contemporary landscapes of the Val d'Aosta, NW Italy. The region became very popular with British tourists in the early nineteenth-century and several amateur and professional artists depicted its landscapes. The paper focuses on the case study of Saint-Pierre, its castle and the surrounding landscapes, examining views by amateur artists like Elizabeth Fortescue and professionals such as John Brett. The examination of art, alongside written accounts, historical cartography and field data, provides insights into the landscape history of the Val d'Aosta. The analysis of the artists' representations raises questions of landscape identity and characterisation and provides evidence for subtle changes in local land use practices which have had a significant impact on land use change. We suggest that this artistic heritage should be recognized as a source to help improve sustainable tourism in the area and to assist in the development of current land management policies.

Introduction

What can topographical and landscape art tell us about the landscape history of a place? Can it provide useful evidence for current and future landscape management? In this paper we explore these questions by considering British paintings and drawings of the Val d'Aosta and Saint-Pierre Castle in the nineteenth-century. We focus first on why the Val d'Aosta became popular with artists and explore how it became a didactic landscape for amateurs and professionals. We then examine John Brett's oil painting *Val d'Aosta* of 1858 and discuss its potential for landscape history research. We discuss questions of topographical accuracy and composition, and the connection between historical geography and art. The analysis of the artists' representations raises questions of landscape identity and characterisation. It also indicates how this documentary heritage could be used to improve sustainable tourism in the area and to address current land management policies.

Landscape historians and geographers have long used landscape and topographical art to understand the social and historical implications of past landscape dynamics on current landscapes (Howard, 1984; Bonehill & Daniels 2009). Several authors have stressed the 'virtues of topography' (Barrell, 2013; Daniels, 2017) in understanding changes in agriculture, gardening, forestry, historical ecology and urbanisation (McLoughlin, 1999; Piana, Balzaretti, Moreno & Watkins, 2012; Piana, Watkins & Balzaretti, 2016; Bruzzone, Watkins, Balzaretti & Montanari, 2017). Historic landscape features define the identity and the sense of place, playing a fundamental role in the development of planning and countryside management in countries like Netherlands and the UK (Finch, 2013). Through the use of field data and historical documents, archaeologists and landscape historians unveil historic landscape features

such as routes, buildings and traditional land use practices (Rippon, 2013). Issues of landscape perception and identity need to be constantly re-defined, particularly in areas, like many Italian mountain landscapes, which have changed substantially due to economic and social processes (Dossche, Rogge & Van Eetvelde, 2016).

Physical geographers and earth scientists have used landscape and topographical views of the Alps and the Apennines to study landscape changes. Zumbhul, Steiner and Nussbaumer (2006) analysed topographical views of the Mer de Glace by the Swiss painter Samuel Birmann (1793-1847) to assess the glacier's fluctuation since the 1820s and found his watercolours to be 'of outstanding topographic quality' and their wide angle to be 'superior to photography' (p. 47). Giardino et al. (2015) assessed historical iconography for the study of past geomorphological processes such as landslides, floods and avalanches. Their multidisciplinary approach included scholars from geosciences, historical geography, history and art history. Nesci and Borchia (2008) examined paintings by Piero della Francesca (c. 1415-92) to interpret the geological landscape of the Montefeltro (Central Italy) and link landscape dynamics with climate change and geomorphological processes.

William Bainbridge (2016; 2017) has examined the value of drawings and paintings as a medium to explore the aesthetics and emotional engagement of Victorian travellers in the Dolomites. For Bainbridge, the intrinsic value of the topography of the Dolomites lies in the cultural significance of a neglected landscape which became increasingly popular in the Victorian period due to its association with Venice and the artist Titian (c.1488-1576). In the Western Alps, guidebooks and drawings by travellers played a crucial role in the development of a codified and stereotypical aesthetic of mountain landscapes of the Val d'Aosta (Devoti, 2011). In this paper we consider why British artists started to visit the Val d'Aosta in the early nineteenth-century. We examine the early topographical tradition of amateur artists such as Henrietta Fortescue,

and the way different artists portrayed the same building, Saint-Pierre Castle. We compare the drawings with the present-day landscape.[1] Finally we consider the well-known view 'from' this castle by John Brett (1858) and how a knowledge of its composition helps landscape historians in providing evidence for landscape processes and change.

British artists and the Val d'Aosta

The Val d'Aosta is surrounded by high mountains which often reach 4000m. The River Dora flows from its source at Courmayeur, below Mont Blanc eastward along the central glacial valley, receiving water from many lateral tributaries. Aosta, strategically situated where routes from the Great and Little Bernard Passes cross, was founded in 25BC by Augustus (Figure 1, Giglio & Pecchio, 2005). In the middle ages the local feudal owners built defensive castles many of which survive today. Grand Tourists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tended to avoid the Val d'Aosta as the Bernard Passes were too high and difficult. By the end of the eighteenth-century the Northern side of the Alps in France and Switzerland had already been discovered by artists, scientists, writers (Wilcox 2017), while the Aosta Valley was relatively unexplored. The established routes were along the Susa Valley near Turin, the Simplon Pass, Tyrol or along the coast through Nice (Black 2003). Consequently, few views of the Aosta Valley were produced by British travellers before the early nineteenth-century. There were a few exceptions: in 1784 John Warwick Smith (1749-1831) painted a watercolour *The Val d'Aosta*, which depicts an unidentified castle, based on a drawing made in 1781.[2] J. M. W. Turner took advantage of the short-lived peace of Amiens to visit the Val d'Aosta in 1802 and make sketches which informed his famous painting *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his army Crossing the Alps*, first exhibited in 1812 (Boase, 1956). Classical descriptions of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps in 218 BC were well known and Turner may have been influenced by Thomas Gray's list of imaginary paintings by artists

which included one by Salvator Rosa of Hannibal passing the Alps with 'elephants tumbling down the precipices' (*Poems*, 1775, p. 307) and by references in Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* of 1794 (Matteson, 1980).[3] Significantly on his 1802 visit to Paris Turner 'had visited David's studio and seen his picture of Napoleon on the St Bernard Pass in which Napoleon was shown as the modern Hannibal.' (Tate, 2010) In 1802 Turner made a sketch of Saint-Pierre Castle, probably the first drawing of the castle made by a British visitor in the Val d'Aosta.[4]

After the Napoleonic wars the number of travellers to Italy increased dramatically and a 'stream of visitors […] flowed from London to Rome' (Brockedon 1835, p. 2). In this period the number of Italian views exhibited at Royal Academy increased dramatically (Howard, 1984). Amateur artists began to visit the Val d'Aosta in increasing numbers. One of the first was Henrietta Anne Fortescue (1763-1841), a skilled amateur water-colourist, who visited Italy in 1817 and 1821 (Mallalieu, 1976, pp. 132; Piana, 2015). Her half-brother, Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1758 -1838) had travelled extensively in France, Switzerland, Spain and Italy (1785-91) and published *Hints to the Travellers in Italy* (1815) and the larger *Classical tour through Italy and Sicily* (1819). In *Hints* Hoare recommended the Val d'Aosta and the Italian lakes as 'a district peculiarly favourable to the artist' where 'the gay Italian landscape of Claude Lorrain' contrasts with 'the Alpine scenery of Salvator Rosa' (1815, p. 21). This is one of the first guidebooks to mention Val d'Aosta landscape which was still little known to British travellers (Garimoldi & Jalla, 2006).

Fortescue travelled in Val d'Aosta in autumn 1817 and made many topographical drawings, 78 of which are now owned by the Regione Valle d'Aosta authority. These drawings are amongst the earliest depictions of landscapes and monuments of the Val d'Aosta. She used pencil outlines and different shades of brown ink to depict sublime subjects such as steep and rocky cliffs, narrow gorges and impetuous torrents and picturesque castles and ruins that are such characteristic features of the

Val d'Aosta (Tucoo-Chala 1996). Although an amateur several of her drawings were later engraved and used to illustrate the 1st and 4th editions of W. S. Gilly's *Narrative of an Excursion to the Mountains of Piedmont in the Year XXIII* (Gilly, 1827) which explored 'picturesque valleys', 'magnificent mountains' and 'Alpine fastnesses' especially attractive to Protestant travellers because here 'the Reformed Religion had its birth'. He was especially interested in the 'Vaudois or Waldenses; Protestant inhabitants of the Cottonian Alps' to the southwest (Gilly, 1827). Fortescue came to Gilly's rescue when an artist he employed in Turin to take views of 'the transcendent beauties and sublimities of nature' produced 'such indifferent performances' that he could not use them. She allowed him 'to embellish my volume with Mr. Nicholson's six lithographic drawings, from her faithful and beautiful sketches'. She lent him views 'from her valuable portfeuille' and told him 'I do not know any part of the continent that we more lamented not being able to explore than this: the scenery promised a rich harvest for the pencil, and the inhabitants, particularly the pastors, are a most interesting people…' (Gilly 1827, xi-xiv).

Her drawings of the Val d'Aosta depict with accuracy vegetation and rocks and often have short written notes. The drawing of the ruined Montmajeur Castle in the Valgrisenche demonstrates Fortescue's care in representing trees, especially the distinction between broad leaved species and conifers, and the complex landscape of grazed, grassy, areas and steep cliffs (Figure 2). Various annotations such as 'grey rock & young firs' are made indicating that her drawing could be worked up into a watercolour later. Another reveals that the foreground is 'covered with juniper running between the rocks' and that the trees in the wood in foreground are 'all firs.' We visited the viewpoint in April 2017 and the present day landscape has great similarities (Figure 3). Today, the rocky slopes of the foreground are still covered by low creeping junipers (*Juniperus sabina*) while the slopes below the castle ruins have naturally

regenerating firs and spruces. The principal change is that there is now much more broadleaved woodland (mainly aspen, limes, ash and birch) which have spread over the grassland which is no longer kept open by grazing and browsing animals.

The first printed illustrations of the Val d'Aosta began to circulate in the 1820s. The army officer and landscape painter James Cockburn (1779-1847) was taught by Paul Sandby and travelled extensively in India, Canada and Europe (Chichester 2004, Bonehill and Daniels 2009). Cockburn drew many views of continental landscapes including Alpine ones which were published in guidebooks such as *Views in the Valley of Aosta Drawn from Nature* (1823) a collection of 28 lithographs depicting spectacular and sublime features of rocky Alpine scenery, severe cliff top castles and Roman bridges and aqueducts. The valley was further popularised by William Brockedon's *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps by which Italy communicates with France, Switzerland and Germany* (1828-1829). Brockedon (1787-1854) was a painter and writer who was fascinated with the Alps which he crossed 58 times in the summers of 1825-9 (Wilkinson, 1971; Hansen & Smith, 1995).[5] His drawings engraved and published in his guide books made a decisive contribution to the popularisation of the Alps and the Val d'Aosta which became increasingly well-known for its association with Hannibal, supported by Turner's 1812 painting (Boase, 1956).

By the early nineteenth-century the Alpine scenery of the Aosta Valley, was becoming increasingly attractive to those interested in classical history, religious rivalries and sublime scenery. The most influential enthusiast was John Ruskin (1819-1900) (Cosgrove, 1979; 2008). Since early childhood he had taken tours with his parents to Scotland, the Lake District, the Wye Valley and North Wales all vital arenas in the development of picturesque sensibilities (Copley & Garside, 1994; Watkins & Cowell, 2012). Rapid sketches and notes were made on the leisurely journeys: the 'carriage windows afforded a permanent frame for

picturesque views' (Hunt, 1982, p. 41). His 13th birthday present was the lavish 1832 edition of Samuel Rogers' poem *Italy*, first published in 1822, reprinted with plates from Turner's drawings, some of which depicted Hannibal crossing the Alps. Ruskin argued that this gift 'determined the main tenor of my life', and was his introduction to both Turner and Italy (Hunt, 1982, p. 48). The family took their first major continental trip in 1833. The following year his Alpine fascination was signaled when on his 15th birthday he asked for Saussure's *Voyages dans les Alps* and William Brockedon's *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps*. (Hunt, 1982, p. 55). In 1835 'The family wandered for two months in Switzerland after leaving Chamonix. Sometimes they would descend onto the Italian side of the Alps' where they found the inhabitants of Aosta 'by no means healthy or cleanly'. (Hunt, 1982, p. 68) It was on this visit that Ruskin sketched Saint-Pierre Castle. On his 1845 journey he told his father that 'I shall go up the Val d'Aoste…. All my mountain drawings I purpose making in the lateral vallies that run from the val d'Aoste up to the central chain of the Alps…. (Shapiro, 1972, p. 42, 27 April 1845). But his plans changed and his father was 'relieved by your not going to Val D'Aosta at present. It is such a sink of Disease, so savage & so out of the way of human beings.' (Shapiro, 1972, p. 157 fn, 9 July 1845). Ruskin did return in 1851 and told his father that he had travelled 'some fifty miles through scenery of continually increasing magnificence.' He enthused over the huge chestnut trees, springing out four or five trunks in a cluster' and described the valley as 'literally roofed over with continuous trellises of vines.' (Ruskin, 1903-12, Vol. XIV, p. 236, fn 1 Ruskin to his father, 26 August 1851)

Views of Saint-Pierre Castle

Saint-Pierre Castle was drawn by several British artists in the early nineteenth-century. It had originated as a fortress in the C11th and went through several ownerships (Aubert 1860). By the 1850s the castle was in a decrepit condition, and as it loomed over the main route into Aosta, and

was only about 6 km to the west of the town, it became a popular subject. The castle was prominently and picturesquely positioned with an adjoining church and set in a village with around 1500 inhabitants in the mid 1850s.[6] In 1873 it was purchased from the Gerbore family by Emanuele Bollati and restructured by the architect Camillo Boggio who added many gothic turrets. The adjoining church was also rebuilt in the 1870s (Mangone, Belli & Tampieri, 2015). Because of these changes, the early nineteenth-century drawings discussed here provide important evidence for the earlier form and appearance of the castle.

Turner's rapid sketch from 1802 shows the castle from the northeast with the village on the left of the drawing (Figure 4). The mountain outlines are clearly depicted and many broadleaved trees are growing in the village and below the castle. The church tower to the left is picked out and the blocky fortress dominates the village. Fifteen years later Fortescue made her drawing on 2 November 1817 (Figure 5). It is taken from the east, from the valley road which is on the left of the drawing, and the castle is placed in the middle-right distance, almost hidden behind the trees. Like Turner, Fortescue emphasises the outline of the mountains, but she attempts also to show the rocky terrain, especially of the crag on which the castle is built. Both artists emphasise the large number of broadleaved trees growing around the castle.

Landscape painter and lithographer James Duffield Harding (1798-1863) visited the Val d'Aosta in 1824 and drew a view of Saint-Pierre Castle (Figure 6) which was lithographed and published in his *Sketches Home and Abroad* (1836).[7] It is a picturesque view of the castle from the west, and it emphasizes the tortuous form of the stepped mule track down and then up to the castle and church. Although the castle dominates the picture, Harding gives greater prominence to the distinct form of the church and nearby buildings than Turner or Fortescue. One of Harding's pupils was John Ruskin who made his sketch of the castle from a more southerly vantage point in 1835 (Figure 7). This is a stripped down

drawing which emphasizes the architectural features, and limits surrounding trees. He celebrated the landscape in a poem:

Fortresses arising round;

Rocks, with ruined castles crowned;

Vineyards green with trellised rail;' (Ruskin, 1903-12, Vol. II, p. 432).

Ruskin was strongly influenced by Harding as a teacher and it is likely that Harding encouraged him to visit the Val d'Aosta and Saint-Pierre so that he could see the landscape that Turner had painted (Hardie, 1968). A few years later in 1845, however, when they were both travelling and drawing together in Italy Ruskin was critical of Harding's 'works for publication'. He noted that Harding's 'sketches are always pretty because he balances their parts together & considers them as pictures - mine are always ugly, for I consider my sketch only as a written note of certain *facts*, & those I put down in the rudest & clearest way as many as possible. Harding's are all for impression - mine all for information.' (Hunt, 1982, p. 153; Shapiro, 1972, p.189).

The last drawing of Saint-Pierre Castle we consider is that by John Brett made 7 July 1858 (Figure 8); he is the only artist we consider who actually stayed in the castle. Brett was advised by Ruskin and it is interesting that his view from almost exactly the same point as that by Ruskin. Again the castle and the church dominate the drawing, although Brett's is more finished and hints at the broadleaved trees around the base of the castle rock. When Brett lodged in the castle it was in poor condition and its ownership was fragmented. During his stay, Brett made several views of the castle which show its structure before the major renovation of the 1870s.[8] (Ruskin, 1903-12, Vol. XIV, pp. xxiii – xxiv, letter to his father 26 August 1858).

In the 1850s guidebooks celebrating the valley began to be produced. Rev J S King's *The Italian valleys of the Pennine Alps* published by John Murray in 1858 considered Saint-Pierre Castle as 'the finest of those above Aosta, with its foot being 'encircled with its gardens and orchards' and the church above. Edouard Aubert's *Vallée d'Aoste* of 1860 with 34 steel engravings and 97 wood engravings, including some of the castles around Saint-Pierre, was the first comprehensive book on its history and geography and this, together with the arrival of the railway in 1886 contributed to popularity of the area in the late nineteenth-century (Devoti, 2011). The five images we discuss are from before this period of popularity and photography. The pictures show how a particular place may become a didactic landscape, which was used by a series of artists, from Turner to Brett, who influenced each other in different ways. They can also be used as a source for revealing the landscape context of the castle and assist in developing contemporary tourist narratives (Figure 9).

The view 'from' the Castle: John Brett and the landscape of Val d'Aosta

John Ruskin (1903-12, Vol. III, p. 621) argued in 1851 that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were not trying to 'imitate the style of any previous epoch' rather 'they are endeavouring to paint, with the highest possible degree of completion, what they see in Nature, without reference to conventional or established rules.' The main reason John Brett (1831–1902) stayed at Saint-Pierre Castle in 1858 was not to draw the castle but to make sketches and then paint, using precise Pre-Raphaelite principles, his major oil landscape *Val d'Aosta* (Figure 10).[9] This was positively reviewed by John Ruskin in his *Academy Notes, 1859*: 'Yes, here we have it at last—some close-coming to it at least—historical landscape, properly so called— landscape painting with a meaning and a use.' He thought 'standing before this picture is just as good as standing in the spot in the

Val d'Aosta, so far as gaining of knowledge is concerned…' But there was a sting in the tail. Ruskin thought it has a 'strange fault' in that it was 'emotionless' with 'no awe of the mountains there—no real love of the chestnuts or vines' and thought it was 'Mirror's work, not Man's' (Ruskin, 1903-12, Vol. XIV, p. 234; p. 237). The Pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais criticised this quality in the same year: 'There is a wretched work like a photograph of some place in Switzerland, evidently painted under [Ruskin's] guidance'. By 1880 Ruskin noted that he had 'hoped much from [Brett's] zeal and fineness of minute execution in realizing, with Dürer-like precision, the detail of the Swiss landscape' but that 'instead, he took to mere photography of physical landscape' (Ruskin, 1903-12, Vol. XIV 22, fn 2; 238, fn 1).

The identification of the precise viewpoint for John Brett's *Valle d'Aosta* (1858) has been debated by art historians. John Ruskin, who had purchased the painting from Brett, remembered in 1880 that it had been painted 'from the window of his lodgings, in a grand castle', at Saint-Pierre (Ruskin, 1903-12, Vol. XIV, p. 238 fn 1). Boase (1956) thought the viewpoint was a rocky hill just to the west of the castle, while Newall's (2007) detailed fieldwork concluded that it was Monte Torrette (870m), half a mile to the northeast. Newall used known distant reference points depicted in the painting, such as Mont Paramont and Tete du Rutor, and argued that their 'correct conjunction' was only possible from Monte Torrette. We discussed the view with local residents and visited the potential viewpoints several times in winter and spring 2017 comparing the representation with the terrain (Figure 11). As Newall pointed out, the angle of view of the painting is very narrow but the landscape features, especially those most distant, are depicted in clear detail. Brett was proud of his excellent eyesight but probably used telescopes or other optical tools to focus on the mountains in the middle and far distance (Payne 2010). One problem is that Saint-Pierre Castle is visible from Monte Torrette, but not shown in the painting. Newall argues that Brett decided

to mask it with rocks and trees, distancing himself from the picturesque interests of earlier visitors such as Turner. Other easily identifiable landmarks were omitted too, including Chatel d'Argent and the village of Introd beyond.

But perhaps we are wrong to search for a precise viewpoint? Indeed there does not seem to be a specific place which precisely matches with the painting in terms of perspective and geographical elements. The painting is less like a landscape photograph than a collage of precise landscape vignettes put together to make a coherent yet selective landscape. The view was constructed from real elements of the landscape directly observed by Brett and annotated in his sketchbooks which include detailed drawings of boulders, trees, terraces with vineyards and arable plots, goats and rural houses. We now consider three of the principal features of the landscape, pastures, viticulture and trees, using the oil painting, Brett's sketches, fieldwork and evidence from the *Gran Carta degli Stati Sardi di Terraferma* map (1866) which provides broad land use information such as V = *Vigna* (Vineyards), B = *Bosco* (Woodland).[10]

The painting shows a landscape many parts of which are formed by grazing and browsing. In the foreground a shepherdess is sleeping under a rock with a small goat nearby. This could be interpreted as a 'constructed' pastoral scene, but is more plausible that Brett was depicting real subjects which he observed in the field. Evidence of such direct observation is provided by two surviving sketches of goats, one labelled 'St Pierre Sep 15' (Figure 12). The goat is of the Saanen breed, originally from Switzerland and today widespread in the Alps. Until the mid twentieth-century there were strong historical contacts between the Swiss canton of Vallais and the Val d'Aosta and the movement of animals over the Great Bernard Pass was very common (Rudy Sandi, personal communication, February 2017).

The painting also shows many open areas along the sides of the valley and particularly the south-facing slope, which is partly terraced. On the

1866 map pastures (P = *pascoli*) are indicated along the valley floor, particularly between Saint-Pierre and Sarre, intermixed with vineyards. Casalis (1849, p. 596) reports that the inhabitants had a 'remarkable income' (*notevole guadagno*) from livestock farming and that cheese (Gruyere) was produced in Saint-Pierre. The lowland meadows, carefully depicted by Brett, would have been cut for hay stored in the traditional farms. In winter the animals were kept indoors, while in spring they were driven to mid-slope pastures, called *mayen,* before reaching the high pastures, at more than 2500 m. (Moreno, 2013). In many areas of the Val d'Aosta this tradition has been lost and cattle are driven up to the high pastures by lorry and as a result pastures and open areas at mid altitude are progressively disappearing. Fieldwork revealed that many of these areas are covered by semi natural woodland of broad leaved species such as the downy oak (*Quercus pubescens*), sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) and the ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) with mainly conifers along the north-facing slope. In the steepest areas, subject to erosion, there are now plantations of black pine (*Pinus nigra*). This loss of meadows is taking place in many parts of the Alps: recent research in Valtellina indicated that there had been a decline of 18.5% between 1980-2000 (Monteiro, Fava, Hiltbrunner, Della Marianna & Bocchi, 2011; Garbarino, Lingua, Martinez Subirá Marta & Motta, 2010). The analysis of Brett's painting, and drawings such as Fortescue's Montmajeur, provide subtle evidence of the loss of small patches of formerly browsed and grazed areas, together forming extensive tracts, which are now secondary woodland.

Wine production was of enormous importance to the economy of the Val d'Aosta in the nineteenth-century as it is today. The 1866 map indicates that vineyards (V) were found at Tour to the north of the river, just below Saint-Pierre Castle. This fits in with their position in Brett's painting and with early nineteenth-century accounts. The principal grape was Torrette, the name of the hill above the village, and the vineyards were planted in

rows, supported by poles and kept low to take advantage of the sun and heat from the rocks (Gatta, 1836, pp. 42-44, as cited in Sandi, 2014). The soil is very poor and rocky and the vines grow through the rocks, supported by narrow dry stone walls (Zuccagni-Orlandini, 1838, p. 265). The wine was sweet and Brett appears to have appreciated it as he recorded the name and location of the vineyards on a written note in one of the Aosta sketchbooks.[11] S. W. King (1858) noted that the 'grapes were nearly ripe in the continuous vineyards' (p. 109) at Torrette which 'are the most celebrated in this district, producing a good sound wine of a light claret quality'. He reported, however, a 'mysterious wine disease' which had been affected plants for years and was still on the increase.[12] Crucial to the success of these vineyards was, and is, an efficient irrigation system. Droughts were frequent in the nineteenth-century and Casalis (1849) argued that the countryside of Saint-Pierre would be more productive if irrigation was improved. The importance of viticulture is also shown in Edouard Aubert's drawings of narrow terraces so characteristic of the area (Moreno, 2013).

Trees are a key element of Brett's landscape. In the right foreground of the painting, five trees are standing in grassland. Ruskin (1903-12, Vol. XIV) describes them as 'white poplars by the roadside' (p. 235) and praises the 'trunks and boughs drawn with an unexampled exquisiteness of texture and curve' (p. 237). The shape of the trees, the silver-grey bark and the blueish foliage suggest that they are aspen (*Populus tremula*), and on our visit to the likely viewpoint we discovered that aspens, which vigorously regenerate from suckers, still grow in a similar position. The wood from the trees was used to make clogs. The leaves were collected in the nineteenth-century as animal fodder, as a supplement to hay for cattle (Re, 1818 p. 21; Watkins, 2014), and the trees depicted by Brett have had their lower branches removed.

In his description of Brett's painting, Ruskin (1903-12, Vol. XIV, p. 237) describes 'two splendid sweet chestnut trees, with forming fruit, good for

making bread of, no less than maize' emphasizing their importance for the local economy. He compares the trees to 'a finished design of Durer's—every leaf a study'. Brett sketched the trunk and foliage of chestnuts in two drawings, one of which is titled *Chestnut behind Sarre* (Figure 13), which is a village two miles to the east. Contemporary accounts refer to thick chestnut groves, sometimes mixed with walnut, along the road side of the bottom of the valley (King, 1858, p. 106, Zuccagni-Orlandini 1838). Interestingly, today, no chestnut trees were found in the immediate area and the Corpo Forestale staff confirmed that none were found in the vicinity. This is probably due to the decline in the economic importance of the chestnut crop and the consequent collapse of the irrigation system which once fed the chestnut groves.

On the higher slopes many of the trees are conifers. Ruskin described pines above the valley, and disagreeably smelling junipers (Ruskin, 1903-12, Vol. XIV, p. 234). We found *Juniperus communis* still characteristic of the area, taking advantage of the dry climate which makes Monte Torrette a Mediterranean enclave in the Val d'Aosta, protected by Natura 2000 law.[13] Fieldwork and map analysis revealed that at low altitudes the juniper is mixed with broad leaved species and Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) which can withstand dry conditions well (Vacchiano, Lingua, Meloni & Motta, 2006). Other species of conifers such as larches (*Larix decidua*), Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) and silver firs (*Abies alba*) are found at higher altitudes.

Conclusion

In this paper we set out to consider what topographical and landscape art can tell us about the landscape history of a place and whether it provides useful evidence to understand past processes, long term changes and provide clues for future management. We demonstrate how the Val d'Aosta became increasingly popular in the early nineteenth-century with

artists and travellers. Part of this interest lay in the celebration of its classical and religious history, but it especially derived from the allure of sublime Alpine scenery. Works by influential artists such as Turner and Ruskin meant that the valley, and specific sites such as Saint-Pierre Castle, became an arena for teaching and learning artistic practices and fashions.

Saint-Pierre today is a medium size municipality immediately west of the suburbs of Aosta, the region's capital and economic centre. Following the end of the Second World War the valley developed fast partly due to its new status of 'special statute region' with significant autonomy. The mountains to the south had been protected by designation in 1922 as the Gran Paradiso National Park, the first in Italy, and there was an increase in winter and summer tourism. The northern boundaries of this park are just five miles from Saint-Pierre Castle, but the village and its surroundings are excluded like other parts of the valley bottom. Today Saint-Pierre and its castle, like the other Aosta villages, is a marginal tourist destination. The Autostrada, which dominates the narrow valley, rushes people past the castles, forts and peaks which can only be glimpsed at speed, very unlike the leisurely viewings from a carriage window of the early nineteenth-century.

We show that one way of understanding the landscape of this part of the valley is to examine a sequence of early nineteenth-century drawings and paintings made by British artists and relate these to the current landscape. Such landscape research has potential to increase the interest and perception of natural and cultural heritage (Bruzzone et al., 2017). The sequence of drawings of Saint-Pierre Castle, a museum since 1985 but closed for major repairs for several years, can be used to demonstrate its importance as a 'didactic landscape' for artists. The drawings of the amateur artist Henrietta Fortescue (1817), and the professional artist John Brett (1858) help us to explore not only the ways trees, crops and landscapes were represented in art, but as evidence for

changes in local land use practices. They show, for example, the subtleties of the distribution of lost patches of different types of meadowland and pasture, and the loss of chestnut cultivation linked to market changes, tree diseases and the lack of maintenance of irrigation channels. They can also be used to identify formerly important traditional practices such as leaf fodder collection (Gimmi and Bürgi, 2007). But in addition they also demonstrate remarkable continuities including the long term survival of particular species, such as *Juniperus sabina* and *Populus tremula* at particular sites and the resilience of viticulture. The analysis of the artists' representations raises questions of landscape identity and characterisation and indicates how this heritage is of value to improve sustainable tourism in the area and to tackle current land management policies.

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Notes

[1] Three field visits in January, February and April 2017 and discussions with local residents and staff of the local Corpo Forestale dello Stato.

[2] John Warwick Smith, *The Val d'Aosta*, 1784. Piedmont, Yale Center of British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. There is another watercolour in the V & A dated 1803: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1069195/val-daosta-piedmont-watercolour-smith-john-warwick/. Ingamells (1997) *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800*, notes that Smith he was based in Rome 1776-81 and travelled back to England via Switzerland with Francis Towne from August 1781. He 'continued to work up his Italian material after his return to England and there are dated

Italian views up to 1796. *Select Views in Italy*, published in London between 1792 and 1799, contained 72 plates engraved after Smith…' p. 869.

[3] Turner may also have been 'inspired by the lost oil painting by J.R. Cozens, which passed through the sale rooms in 1802.' (http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-snow-storm-hannibal-and-his-army-crossing-the-alps-n00490, published in Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll, 1984. *The Paintings of J.M.W. Turner*, revised ed., (New Haven and London).

[4] J M W Turner, Chateau de St Pierre, Val d'Aosta, *Looking towards Villenueve, Château d'Argent in the Distance*, 1802. Turner Bequest LXXIV 62, Tate. Turner made a second visit to the valley in 1836 and the views and sketches he made then have been analysed by Hill (2000). See the *Fort Bard Sketchbook* (1836), Turner Bequest CCXCIV, Tate.

[5] He was a friend of Camillo Benso, Conte di Cavour (1810-1861) who was a key figure in the unification of Italy. Brockedon was a founding member of the Royal Geographical Society and at a dinner there in 1835 he introduced Cavour to the publisher John Murray (Bogge, 1991).

[6] There is a second medieval castle in the village: Chateau La Tour was built around the C11th on the edge of a cliff over the Dora River. It belonged to the Sarriod family until 1921 and its current appearance dates back to the C18th (Cerruti, Borney & Ceriano, 1993).

[7] The drawing on which it is based is held at the Regione Autonoma Valle d'Aosta Collection.

[8] RMG Archive, John Brett sketchbook no. 3 Val d'Aosta 1858, PAF 8705.

[9] This is in a private collection and measures 87.6 x 68 cm.

[10] Corpo di Stato Maggiore Sardo, Carta topografica degli stati in terraferma di S.M. il Re di Sardegna, 1866, sc. 1:50.000, sheet 29, La Thuile.

[11] RMG Archive, *Wine Torrette, a Klr from Sarre*, John Brett sketchbook no. 3 Val d'Aosta 1858, PAF 8734.

[12] This disease is likely to be powdery mildew (*Oïdium Tuckeri*) which was first noticed in 1845 and spread through much of Europe, including Italy, by the 1850s. It is too early for phylloxera, which did not arrive in Europe until the early 1860s where it was noticed in southern France (Unwin, 1991) pp. 282-4.

13 http://www.regione.vda.it/risorsenaturali/conservazione/natura2000/siti/IT1205050/default_i.aspx.